

Preventing Social Justice Burnout with Positive Psychology

Social justice activism is an important field involving the identification of societal problems and the actions to resolve them. The negativity bias, wherein humans are naturally inclined to focus on potential problems, encourages the focus on problems with the status quo. Both the focus on this and determination that it is unacceptable serve as the basis for social justice activism. This bias may motivate even the least informed individuals to act and learn more about a need to be addressed. However, an over-emphasis on negativity can be detrimental to emotional and mental health. Activists, who are frequently utilizing their negativity bias, are at considerable risk for these poor health outcomes. The negativity bias becomes stronger with more use, which leads to increased stress, a negative mindset, and burnout. It can create cognitive distortions, and ultimately make efforts for activism seem fruitless and without value. To counter this potential burnout, positive psychology techniques and concepts can be applied.

Using Strengths

Positive psychology is the science of happiness, with the goal to improve people's overall well-being. It looks at (1) strengths/positive qualities, (2) positive subjective states, and (3) the institutions and social forces that promote them. For the area of strengths/positive qualities, the field utilizes the VIA Survey of Character Strengths as a tool to assess the 24 universal characteristics of an individual, including the identification of which come more or less naturally to them. These characteristics fall under six main categories: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Social justice, as a field, is very much focused on the characteristics of justice. Individuals, however, may not have top strengths in

this category. This can be stressful for activists who are such individuals because of the conflict between their natural inclinations (in strengths other than justice) and what is expected within the social justice movement. This conflict may push them to ineffectively spend energy on perceiving the world through a lens of justice, and subsequently push them closer to burnout. The sailboat metaphor is especially poignant in this situation. A person can spend all their time plugging holes in the boat to keep from sinking (addressing weaknesses), but they still will not get anywhere without raising the sail (addressing strengths). It is possible for an activist to “plug the holes” by focusing on understanding a social justice concept through the lens of fairness or some other justice-oriented strength. But if justice characteristics are not in that person’s top strengths, then it will be stressful and take energy away from promoting the more demanding and important *actions* of social justice. Instead, it is more effective to “raise the sails” by using individual strengths as a lens for understanding and performing actions of social justice.

As an example, being able to approach an issue with critical thinking is important to resolving social justice-related disputes within a community. This skill would be found under the VIA characteristic of judgement. However, if this strength does not come naturally to a person who needs to resolve the dispute, they can rely on another strength. If this person is innately strong in the characteristic of humility instead, then they can utilize that strength such as by acknowledging that no side is ultimately better than the other, and encouraging both parties of the dispute to be less prideful so that the dispute could be solved more peacefully. Both sides can be guided using humility to reach a resolution that the strength of judgement would also achieve. This is more effective than trying to force critical thinking without being more capable in that realm. Additionally, the well-being of all the participants

involved in the dispute is improved. It is entirely possible to make up for your weaknesses with your strengths by simply identifying the commonalities and working towards a common goal, and it is also more desirable.

The idea of focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses is related to Joseph Campbell's concept of "following your bliss," which is centered on the idea of acting according to what is personally desirable in order to organize and bring direction to life. With strengths in fairness or justice, it may come easy to participate in social justice. When strengths are not in that area, then using fairness as the only motivator for social justice will be ineffective and create guilt when it does not work. However, using other strengths to identify why social justice is personally important allows it to become a happier prospect, and thus allows social justice to become a skill rather than a burden. Following your bliss can mean different things to people and ultimately have the same results, with the difference being in quality of life.

Countering Negativity

Another positive psychology technique is in identifying and addressing cognitive distortions. As previously mentioned, the negativity bias is put into heavy use during activism, and this encourages the growth of cognitive distortions that can make the work seem futile and anxiety-inducing. However, by tracking and addressing these distortions, it becomes easier to stay focused and emotionally healthy. The five cognitive distortions defined by David Burns in *Feeling Good* include overgeneralization, mental filter, disqualifying the positive, jumping to conclusions, and mind reading. In the context of social justice, an example of mental filter may be seeing a politician opposing your cause be elected, and subsequently obsessing over this bleak turn of events to where everything else

seems pointless. However, this event is not worthy of becoming the central focus, and it is worthier to acknowledge the positives of the situation (such as how it may become easier to rally people around the cause). Another distortion is disqualifying the positive, which may be identified in social justice by an activist seeing one battle won but deciding it is irrelevant because of the many more ongoing, fruitless battles. This contributes to an unnecessary sense of hopelessness, and can be countered by listing hopeful possibilities sprouting from the win and acknowledging the work it took to get to that point. Regardless of the type of cognitive distortion that appears, each can be countered with awareness of the five types and understanding the detrimental effects of letting them be in the forefront. Making the effort to shift to a more positive focus is ultimately a favorable outcome to the well-being of all activists.

Strengthening Bravery & Resilience for Open-Mindedness

Beyond openness to different perspectives, open-mindedness is defined as the willingness to search for evidence that actively opposes a person's own position in order to weigh such evidence fairly (similar to the VIA strength of judgement). As an activist, this strength becomes essential to employ regardless of whether it falls under a person's top strengths or not. It provides the background knowledge for well-founded beliefs that can be argued in the face of any conflicting evidence, and can reduce the power of automatic, negative reactions to future conflicting evidence. At the same time, facing the opposition can be incredibly stressful. It is entirely likely to encounter personal, heated arguments more often than the rational ones that provide useful conflicting evidence to weigh. To better work on open-mindedness, activists can focus on strengthening their bravery and resilience.

It is assumed at this point that an activist has already accepted the challenges that come with moral bravery. What comes next is to strengthen the psychological bravery needed to confront negative feelings associated with opposing arguments. There are six techniques to strengthen bravery: Work on increasing self-confidence, find a good mentor who has already been through what you want to face (whether a close friend or a personal hero), and identify good examples of bravery for the situation (real or fictional). Additionally, find an online or in-person support group of people with similar goals (or create one if needed), take specific training that is relevant to the challenging tasks involved (especially aimed at improving critical thinking and debating skills), and look into relevant psychology and psychotherapeutic techniques that provide affirmation and support. As bravery is developed with these positive psychology techniques, open-mindedness can be more easily performed for more effective social justice work.

Even with strengthened bravery, facing the opposition repeatedly for the purpose of building open-mindedness can remain very stressful. Human beings are relatively resilient already (evidenced by the many current professional activists), yet this resilience can be improved upon and even lead to stress-related growth using five personal resources that help the most: mindfulness, mood clarity, purpose in life, optimism, and active coping. Resilience can be built up by being present and taking in all the available information (mindfulness), and making sense of/integrating personal feelings into actions (mood clarity). These two help for staying grounded and ensuring a healthy state of being before seeking out the negativity within the opposition. Additionally, looking at motivators in life that assist in dealing with challenges (purpose in life) and deliberately acknowledging a positive outcome (optimism) both create confidence and stability for coping with

stress. Most importantly, resilience will be solidified by taking actions that help to deal with stress (active coping) by utilizing these resources and more. Active coping does not mean to necessarily engage in arguments with the opposition to be proven “right,” but engaging such techniques that help to acknowledge what actions would make a genuine difference for the betterment of society.

Promoting Strong Social Support

Beyond other self-care strategies, the power of social support assists well-being. Just like with any job, close interactions outside of activism provides security and comfort. Positive psychology can provide a structure for stronger social relationships with skills relevant to stronger interactions. Empathy is one of these skills, and is especially valuable for working through negative or complicated emotions. Paul Wong proposes five types of empathy: instinctual, relational, experiential, basic/primary, and advanced. Of these, basic/primary and advanced empathy are skills that can be purposefully developed. Basic/primary empathy particularly involves the skills of active listening, making frequent eye contact, nonverbal expressions (e.g. nodding), and reflecting what the speaker says through summarizing and paraphrasing. These allow the speaker to be more central to the conversation, and encourages a sense of validation and a feeling that the listener is interested. Additionally, advanced empathy can go beyond basic validation by developing and demonstrating a stronger insight into the speaker’s implicit feelings. This encourages a more genuine, heartfelt conversation and shows that the listener “gets” the speaker on a deeper level. Together, these skills of empathy promote a deeper and stronger relationship.

Beyond acknowledging negative or complex emotions through empathy, strong social interactions rely on *positive* emotions. While an activist may become accustomed to the former, the latter is essential to ensure strong social interactions that truly lead to growth and reduced stress. Understanding the ways to respond to good news can allow a person to emphasize the style that leads to stronger relationships. Shelly Gable identified four possible responses that are constructive or destructive, and active or passive. Destructive responses are generally very invalidating. When active they can come off as demeaning and quashing of the good news, and when passive they shift the focus inward and away from the speaker. Even if the intention is put in a positive light, both of these responses are very negative towards the speaker and do not promote strong relationships. Constructive responses are more validating. However, a *passive* constructive response is very low energy or delayed and comes off as insincere. This results in the most harmful style of responding, as it creates a sense that the listening activist does not care at all. On the other hand, *active* constructive responses are very enthusiastic and authentic, revealing that the listener does genuinely care about the individual and empathizes with the excitement over the good news. This results in the most helpful style of responding, and develops positive feelings and reduced stress for both the listening activist and the speaker.

Responses are not the only aspect important for strengthening social relationships, and only focusing on responses may be interpreted as a lack of deeper love for the individual. The five languages of love can give an idea of what kinds of uninitiated actions promote well-being in a social relationship, including words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. Words of affirmation can clearly function as responses, but can also work as

uninitiated acts by the activist relaying unprompted kind words or compliments. Quality time involves removing distractions like cell phones during time spent together, showing undivided attention and meaningful care towards an individual. Receiving gifts, especially outside of special occasions, suggests that a person is being thought of, enough to spend time/money to pick out an item that would make them happy. Acts of service are focused on giving *time* to a person, by volunteering help and so showing an implicit desire to improve that person's quality of life. Physical touch demonstrates connection and trust, whether it may be intimate as with a lover or casual touches as with a friend. In US society, physical touch is often discouraged and it may be harder to demonstrate this language of love unprompted. However, this can be countered by simply asking consent to act on a desire to hug or lean against a person, and afterwards may prompt more physical touch in the future. These languages of love are all very effective for developing strong social interactions, and can improve well-being with the positive emotions also associated with performing acts of kindness.

Conclusion

There is a phrase that "you can't pour from an empty cup." In this case, the pouring is representative of promoting social justice and the empty cup is caused by burnout. While social justice undoubtedly is a necessary field, facing all the associated negativity can become detrimental to the activists involved. Positive psychology provides a valuable path for protecting against stress and burnout for these individuals, including such things as effectively using mental energy, disempowering negativity, strengthening the self, and developing a strong social

network. Together, these ensure that the activist's cup is full and they have the capacity to truly help other people reach a better place in society.